



Vincentian Heritage Journal

Volume 32 | Issue 1

Article 1

Spring 3-6-2014

Conversion and Discernment According to Vincent de Paul

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Recommended Citation

Udovic, Edward R. C.M., Ph.D. (2014) "Conversion and Discernment According to Vincent de Paul," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 32 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol32/iss1/1>

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Conversion and Discernment According to Vincent de Paul

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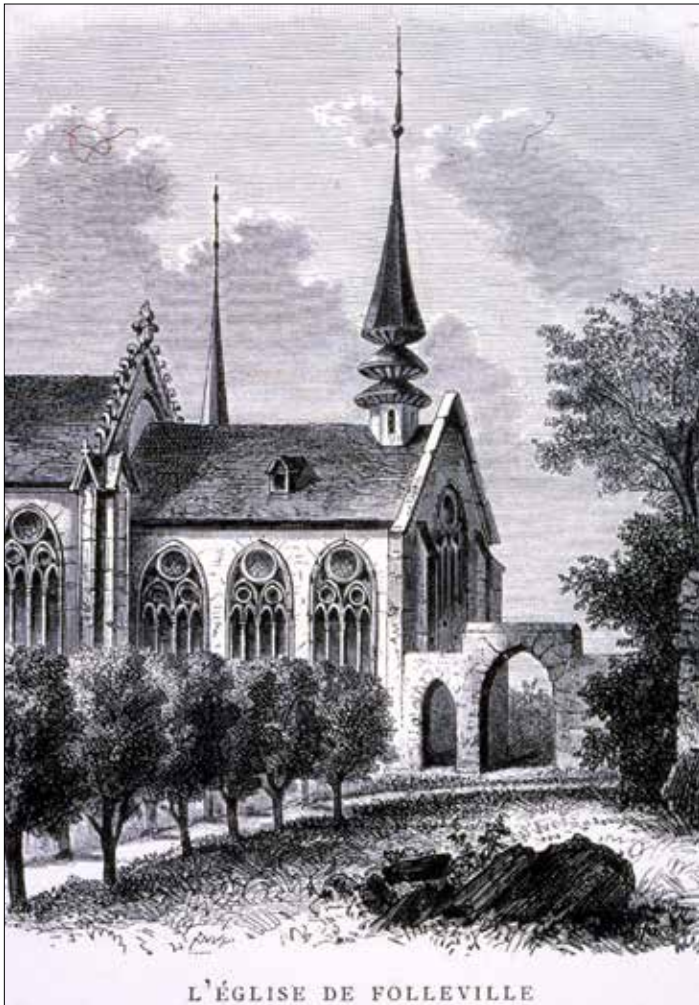
*“Oh Monsieur, what a happiness to will nothing but what God wills, to do nothing but what is in accord with the occasion Providence presents, and to have nothing but what God in His Providence has given us.” **

* *Vincent de Paul: Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, ed. and trans. by Jacqueline Kilar, D.C., Marie Poole, D.C., et al, 1-13a & 13b (New York: New City Press, 1985-2010), 3:193. Hereafter cited as CCD.

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The L'église Saint-Jacques-le-Majeur-et-Saint-Jean-Baptiste, or Church of Folleville.

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Introduction

For Vincent de Paul the life-long conversion required by a vocation¹ to Christian discipleship begins with the prayerful discernment of God's will in one's day-to-day life, the free decision to accept that will in faith and love and then, to the best of one's ability, living that faith in action and love² relying always on God's grace. Thus conversion and discernment are two sides of the one coin of the vocation of discipleship. This article will examine the ways in which Vincent de Paul reflected with, and for, his followers on the spiritual foundations of their vocation to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, the Evangelizer of the Poor.³

In January 1617, after the completion of the Christmas season, Vincent de Paul traveled with Madame de Gondi and her retinue to visit the family's estates northwest of Paris in the province of Picardy. Their destination was the small village of Folleville where the Gondi chateau, with its adjacent parish church and family funerary chapel were located. Françoise-Marguerite de Silly⁴ had brought these ancestral lands to her marriage as part of her dowry when she married Philippe-Emmanuel de Gondi in June 1604.⁵

¹ According to Vincent: "a vocation is a call from God to do something." *Ibid.*, 9:279.

² See *Ibid.*, 9:354.

³ For a brief review of Vincent de Paul's Christology see, Robert P. Maloney, C.M., *The Way of Vincent de Paul. A Contemporary Spirituality in the Service of the Poor* (Brooklyn, New City Press, 1992), 19-36. Hereafter cited as *Maloney*.

⁴ For a brief biographical sketch of Madame de Gondi, see *CCD*, 1:19.

⁵ For a brief biographical sketch of Philippe-Emmanuel de Gondi, see *Ibid.*, 1:18.

Madame de Gondi was a noble woman of intelligence, determination, and piety. She and Vincent de Paul had witnessed the consequences of the spiritual abandonment suffered by the poor people of the countryside.⁶ The Gondi estates, after all, were spread across many provinces of the kingdom. Since the spiritual welfare of thousands of peasants was part of her family's responsibility before God, and since they were a leading *dévot* family which took their religious responsibilities seriously,⁷ it seems in hindsight to have been inevitable that at some point these experiences and this faith would meet at some providential tipping point.

This tipping point came famously through the incident, sometime that January, of Monsieur Vincent hearing the death-bed confession of an elderly peasant in the town of Gannes near Folleville.⁸ This man later told Madame de Gondi of the great peace that had descended upon his soul after having had the opportunity to make a general confession of his life to Monsieur Vincent.

Madame de Gondi also had her own troubling experience of encountering a confessor so ignorant that he did not even know the Latin formula of absolution.⁹ She realized that even as a noble woman she could not be guaranteed access to the spiritual and sacramental ministrations of the Church, upon which she believed her salvation depended. So, at this moment of insight she turned to her trusted chaplain and spiritual director and asked what on the surface might have seemed an impulsive and even innocuous question: "What must be done?"¹⁰ This question was far from being impulsive, however, and it certainly was not innocuous. From the perspectives of both Madame de Gondi's and Monsieur Vincent's shared faith, asking this question at that precise moment was providential and was the result of a direct "inspiration" from God.¹¹ Vincent noted, "It's characteristic of God always to prompt us to do what is good.... All the good we do is done by inspiration.... No one is saved except by inspiration and the good use we make of it."¹²

This question would, as a matter of fact, become *the* question that Vincent would spend the rest of his life striving to answer, beginning with the first sermon (probably given within the context of a parish mission) that he preached at Madame de Gondi's request in the church of Saint Jacques at Folleville on the Feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul Wednesday, 25 January 1617. It would also, in time, become *the* question for Louise de Marillac.

⁶ It should be remembered that in this era the vast majority of France's population lived in the countryside.

⁷ See Louis Abelly, *Life of the Venerable Servant of God: Vincent de Paul*, trans. by William Quinn, F.S.C., and ed. by John E. Rybolt, C.M., 3 vols. (New York: New City Press, 1987), 1:59. Hereafter, *Abelly*.

⁸ CCD, 11:2-4. See also *Abelly*, 1:59-62.

⁹ CCD, 11:162-163.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 11:3.

¹¹ According to Vincent angels are the agents of God's inspiration: "The angels take care of us in this latter way; they inspire us gently and almost imperceptibly to do good, and then leave us full liberty to do it or not." *Ibid.*, 7:634.

¹² *Ibid.*, 10:8.

“What must be done?” Implicit in this question are the underlying questions asked and answered in the imperative as questions of faith and conscience: “What *must* I do?” “What *must* you do?” “What *must* we do?”

Q: “What must be done?”¹³

A: “God’s will must be done in us, and in all that concern us.”

Vincent de Paul had only one answer to the question of “What must be done?” His “greatest desire”¹⁴ was always that “[God’s] will [must] be done in us and in all that concerns us.”¹⁵ Or, as he also said, “Let us pray that you and I may always have one and the same will and non-will with Him, and in Him.”¹⁶ Or, even further, “I am sure that you wish and do not wish what God wishes and does not wish, and that you are disposed to want and not want only... what God seems to want and not want.”¹⁷ Finally, Vincent imparted, “You have acted according to the good pleasure of God and our own maxim in letting God’s Providence act, without contributing anything to it but your own acquiescence.”¹⁸

This salvific will¹⁹ was revealed, as God promised, in the person of the Savior; his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ the Word made flesh. God’s sovereign will must be done in our lives according to the example of how Christ obediently fulfilled that same will in his life “actively and passively by doing and not doing”²⁰ and through his prayer of “your will be done”²¹ finally “becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.”²²

Vincent reminded his followers, “You are God’s and God is yours.”²³ Therefore, “God has great plans for you, directed toward helping you do what Jesus Christ did when He was on earth.”²⁴ For “the more we are like Our Lord, stripped of everything, the more we will share in His Spirit. The more we seek, like Him, the Kingdom of God His Father and to establish it in ourselves and in others, the more will the necessities of life be given us.”²⁵ In addition, he said, “Rest assured that the maxims of Jesus Christ and the examples of his

¹³ For a discussion of *the Vincentian Question* see: Edward R. Udovic, C.M., “Podcast: ‘The Vincentian Question.’” Office of Mission and Values, DePaul University (April 2007). Accessed online at: <http://smedia.depaul.edu/bcicirel/podcasts/vquestion.mp3>.

¹⁴ CCD, 1:579.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 7:297.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:579.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:54.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 6:12.

¹⁹ Vincent describes God’s salvific will in this way: “The salvation of souls is so dear to Him that He takes all the care needed to put them on the easiest path to arrive on the road to heaven.” *Ibid.*, 9:279.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 7:506.

²¹ Philippians 2:8.

²² Matthew 6:10, 26:42.

²³ CCD, 8:163.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 3:615.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 8:175.

life (especially his “hidden life”²⁶) are not misleading; they produce their fruits in due time. Anything not in conformity with them is vain and everything turns out badly for one who acts according to the contrary maxims. Such is my belief and such is my experience.”²⁷

The Christ who captured the heart of Vincent de Paul, who sealed his conversion, and who guided all his discernment and actions was the Christ revealed in Scripture as the Evangelizer of the Poor and the source and model of all Charity.²⁸ Therefore for Vincent de Paul, God’s will must be done in imitation of how Christ the Evangelizer of the Poor fulfilled it in word and deed: proclaiming the kingdom of God by announcing the good news of salvation to the poor with “the intention of the pure glory of God.”²⁹

God continues the unfolding of the “great hidden treasures”³⁰ of his salvific will in history through the agency of the Holy Spirit, working through the visible Church as the Body of Christ. This revelation takes place through the unfurling of a loving plan³¹ that embraces every person, foreseeing their options and choices moment-by-moment, decision-by-decision, for all ages until the end of time. At any given moment, this “adorable”³² and mysterious plan³³ is revealed through the prophetic “signs of the time,”³⁴ and unfolds inexorably through the relationships, events, and communities of one’s life and one’s world.

Vincent believed “Grace has its moments,”³⁵ and “that the things of God come about by themselves and that wisdom consists in following Providence step-by-step.”³⁶ So he was careful always to point out what Christians so often seem to forget, “God’s works are not governed according to our views and wishes.”³⁷ However, he also taught that God does offer each human being, and in particular each Christian, the unmerited, unconditional

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 2:315. See also: 1:54, 7:532.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 2:316.

²⁸ Luke 4:18, referencing Isaiah 61:1-2. See also, Luke 7:21-22.

²⁹ *CCD*, 3:47.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:60.

³¹ Vincent notes, “Heaven and earth look with pleasure on the happy lot that has fallen to you of honoring by your duty that incomprehensible charity by which Our Lord came down upon earth to come to aid and assist us in our slavery.” *Ibid.*, 4:361.

³² *Ibid.*, 8:175.

³³ See *Ibid.*, 9:323.

³⁴ The phrase made popular by Pope John XXIII in his 1961 Apostolic Constitution, *Humanæ salutis*, convoking the Second Vatican Council.

³⁵ *CCD*, 2:499.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 2:521.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 7:531.



An engraved contemporary portrait of Madame de Gondy.

Image collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute



gift of the “sufficient graces,”³⁸ “special graces,”³⁹ and “appropriate graces”⁴⁰ that he/she might need at any given moment to discern and follow his providential plan. In the final analysis, “the grace of perseverance is the greatest grace of all; it crowns all others.”⁴¹

Reflecting on this outpouring of God’s assistance Vincent noted: “Since, then all these graces have been prepared for you, and our good God, who grants them, desires nothing so much as to lavish them on those who truly want to make use of them, what is there to prevent you from being filled with them, destroying by their power all that remains of the old man in you....?”⁴²

Vincent’s own answers to this question, and his personal sanctity, emerged gradually through prayerful discernment carried out through the prisms of his faith and his experience. In this case, the answers he discerned were monumental in scale and of lasting importance. For the sake of the evangelization and salvation of the poor it was God’s will that the Church of France must be reformed as envisioned by the Council of Trent: bishop-by-bishop, diocese-by-diocese, parish-by-parish, and priest-by-priest. Further, it was God’s will that our brothers and sisters in Christ who are poor and suffering must everywhere

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 13a:167.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 3:159.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 3:143.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 8:292-293.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 5:462.

and always be recognized as “our lords and masters”⁴³ — loved, and effectively served with the proverbial “strength of our arms and the sweat of our brows.”⁴⁴ After all, as Vincent said, in the end, “doing good isn’t everything; it must be done well.”⁴⁵

These answers in turn begged the further question of discernment: “What are the means that God is revealing as those destined to best fulfill and sustain these missions?”⁴⁶ Over time, Vincent de Paul’s discernment of God’s answers to these questions led directly to the foundation between 1617 and 1633 of the Confraternities of Charity, the Congregation of the Mission, the Ladies of Charity, and the Daughters of Charity. In the case of discernment with respect to the foundation of the Daughters of Charity, Monsieur Vincent’s was a shared one with Louise de Marillac, Mademoiselle Le Gras.

Successively, these answers led to more questions of what I would call foundational discernment: What are the virtues⁴⁷ and rules that God is revealing as those best designed to guide the members of these groups to fulfill and sustain their missions over time? This further discernment led Vincent and Louise to a decades-long effort, culminating in the various Rules that are their enduring spiritual legacy to their communities, the Church, and the poor.⁴⁸

Until the end of his life, when questioned about the origins of his great works, Vincent de Paul without fail gave full credit to Madame de Gondi for having first had the faith, inspiration, and courage to ask this question, and the determination to find an answer for it.⁴⁹ Almost four centuries later the question “What must be done?” remains *the* inescapable question which these same Vincentian communities, and the wider international Vincentian Family, are still trying to answer with fidelity.

If this question already has its definitive answer in our shared baptismal commitments as Christ’s disciples to follow God’s will “in us and in all that concerns us,” then we are also asked to consider: What must “I,” “You,” and “We” do as members of the Vincentian family to discern God’s will being revealed through his providential plan. How, when, and where are we today called by justice and empowered by charity to serve our brothers and sisters who are poor?⁵⁰

⁴³ See for example, *Ibid.*, 10:215.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 11:32.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 11:43.

⁴⁶ See, for example, *Ibid.*, 12:122.

⁴⁷ For a discussion of Vincentian virtues, see *Maloney*, 37-69. See also, Edward R. Udovic, C.M., “Podcast: Vincent’s Values: A spiritual perspective,” Office of Mission and Values, DePaul University (November 2006). Accessed online at: http://smedia.depaul.edu/bcicirel/podcasts/vincent_values.mp3.

⁴⁸ See CCD, 13a and 13b for the texts of these rules.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 11:3, n.2; See also *Ibid.*, 11:110.

⁵⁰ See *Ibid.*, 2:68.

*The pre-requisite for discernment achieved through conversion:
unrestricted readiness: ready for anything in God's plan.*

According to Vincent de Paul, "We mustn't trust ourselves because we're constantly changing; that's why we need to reflect often on ourselves in order to make amends for the failings our corrupt nature causes us to commit. Just as a clock has to be wound every day to rectify any loss of time, we must always start over in practicing mortification of our passions because we always need to be working on ourselves from one minute to the next."⁵¹

Thus, the pre-requisite to being able to discern God's will at any given moment, in answer to *the* Vincentian question, is the adoption of a state of self-emptying, "holy indifference."⁵² "We must give ourselves to God in all respects."⁵³ The "unreserved gift of yourself"⁵⁴ requires that we become "ready for anything and become completely detached from ourselves."⁵⁵ It also means, as Vincent noted, praying with "a spirit of resignation"⁵⁶ that "God grant that we may receive whatever happens with one and the same heart! I mean accepting the good and the bad indifferently. He will doubtless do so if we reduce our own desires and ways of action to nothing in His presence, allowing ourselves to be governed by His wisdom in the belief that whatever happens is best for us, even though it may be contrary to our feelings."⁵⁷ Vincent also observed, "...we have only to commend [our needs] to His Providence, be faithful to our obligations, and be convinced that sooner or later God will provide what He knows we need for His plan for us. What more do we have to do?"⁵⁸

According to Vincent, this "disposition"⁵⁹ "is an anticipated Paradise beginning in this life."⁶⁰ It can only be achieved with great "perseverance"⁶¹ because it requires that each person have knowledge of "the anatomy of human will,"⁶² and in "awe and humility"⁶³ learn to "mistrust"⁶⁴ themselves and thereby abandon human nature's "own ways of acting."⁶⁵

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 9:524.

⁵² For example: *Ibid.*, 1:112.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 4:282.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 7:348.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 4:282.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 3:614.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 7:292.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 7:560.

⁵⁹ For example, *Ibid.*, 1:36.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:579.

⁶¹ See for example, *Ibid.*, 2:146.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 4:55.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 7:540.

⁶⁴ See for example, *Ibid.*, 1:150.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 2:515.

Each person must “[be] truly convinced that [we] are capable only of spoiling everything”⁶⁶ and must choose to “sacrifice”⁶⁷ the “obstacles”⁶⁸ of our own cherished opinions, comfort, ideas, desires, preferences, ideologies, assumptions, prejudices, time frames, plans, and “self-will” (according to Vincent “the submission of our senses and our reason.”)⁶⁹

Only a resigned soul “stripped of everything”⁷⁰ can “be on guard”⁷¹ against “a thousand outbursts”⁷² of self-will, or of “anticipating”⁷³ providence, and be protected from the “temptations”⁷⁴ and “illusions”⁷⁵ that our “self-sufficiency”⁷⁶ and “rebellious”⁷⁷ “pride”⁷⁸ inevitably create to try to frustrate the plans of Divine Providence. In Vincent’s words, this would “be a crime for the children of Providence.”⁷⁹

Vincent acknowledged that the “holy resolutions”⁸⁰ to be “stripped of everything,”⁸¹ as described above, would always be “repugnant to [human] nature”⁸² since they lay out such “a narrow, rough path.”⁸³ This experience does after all represent the challenge at the heart of religious conversion: “that we carry our cross daily,”⁸⁴ and “be happy at the foot of the Cross.”⁸⁵ He observed, “We must act against what is painful and either break our heart or soften it to get it ready for anything.”⁸⁶ This conversion, “the edifice of our perfection,”⁸⁷ is thus in its essence the movement from restricted (conditional) to unrestricted (unconditional) readiness to do God’s will. “Just let Him do His Will in you... and await it in all your exercises. All you need to do is to devote yourself entirely to God.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 7:389. Vincent went so far as to say, “Alas, if we were truly humble, every one of us would consider ourselves worse than the devil. This is no exaggeration, for we should really do this because, if he weren’t hardened in his sin and were to receive even the least of the graces we have been given, he’d make better use of them than we do.” *Ibid.*, 10:297.

⁶⁷ See for example, *Ibid.*, 4:238.

⁶⁸ See for example, *Ibid.*, 5:84.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 1:579.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 8:175.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 2:278.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 2:277.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 2:499.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 3:615.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:108.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:526.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 5:473.

⁷⁸ See for example, *Ibid.*, 1:526.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 1:290.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 3:615.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 8:175.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 6:213.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 7:181.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 4:171.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:155.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:579.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 9:525.

Oh! How little it takes to be very holy: to do the will of God in all things”⁸⁸ and “to put our feet only in the place It has marked out for us.”⁸⁹ Or as Vincent also said, “Indeed, the great secret of the spiritual life is to abandon all that we love to Him by abandoning ourselves to all that He wishes, with perfect confidence that everything will turn out for the best. That is why it has been said that all things will turn to good for those who serve God. Let us serve Him then... but let us serve Him as He wishes, and let us allow Him to act.”⁹⁰

Vincent went on to note, “This mistrust of your own strength must be the basis for the trust you should have in God.”⁹¹ The development of a sense of self-mistrust (the definition of humility) only succeeds “in proportion”⁹² to the degree to which a person instead places their “exuberant trust”⁹³ and “redoubles [their] confidence”⁹⁴ in God’s “unrivalled love” for us.⁹⁵ After all “we belong to Him,”⁹⁶ who “is all good and all wise.”⁹⁷

Vincent’s advice was simple: seek “a total dependence on God”⁹⁸ and “place all your trust” in Him.⁹⁹ “Entrust yourselves to God, call upon Him, and rest assured that He will be your strength, your consolation, and, one day, the glory of your souls.”¹⁰⁰ “Put your trust in Him, I beg you, and your heart’s desire will be fulfilled.”¹⁰¹ Vincent also advised, “consider Our Lord close by you and within you, ready to put His hand to the work as soon as you call upon Him for help, and you will see that all will go well.”¹⁰²

In the end, “if you want to have peace of heart and a thousand blessings from God, do not listen any longer either to your own judgment or will. You have already made a sacrifice of them to God; be very careful not to take back the use of them. Allow yourself to be guided, and rest assured that God will be the one who guides you; but where? To the freedom of his children, to a superabundance of consolations, to great progress in virtue, and to your eternal happiness.”¹⁰³

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 2:47.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:499.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 8:298.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 3:143.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 3:136.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 3:279.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 3:206.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3:200.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3:509.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 6:113.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4:387.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 13b:326.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 4:169.

¹⁰¹ See for example, *Ibid.*, 1:84.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 3:143.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 7:589-590.



St. Jane de Chantal, heart and crucifix in her hands.

Image collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute



Louise de Marillac described this state of holy indifference when she prayed, “No desires — no resolutions. The grace of my God will accomplish whatever He pleases in me.”¹⁰⁴ Or as Jane Frances de Chantal also once wrote to Vincent de Paul: “It seems to me that I am simply awaiting what God will be pleased to do with me. I have no desires nor plans. Nothing is keeping me from allowing God to act.... I have neither opinion nor feeling with regard to the future, but, at present, I am doing what I think it is necessary to do, without thinking any further.”¹⁰⁵

For Vincent de Paul the “infallible”¹⁰⁶ signs of readiness for authentic discernment (“this good disposition”)¹⁰⁷ are a sense of abiding cheerfulness,¹⁰⁸ calmness, and “peace of heart”¹⁰⁹ — “So what remains for you except to be at peace?”¹¹⁰ Vincent advised Louise de Marillac “to try to live content among your reasons for discontent.... That is your center and what He asks of you for the present, and for the future, forever.”¹¹¹ To achieve such calmness and harmony was to “honor Our Lord’s peace of soul.”¹¹² He further remarked,

¹⁰⁴ *Spiritual Writings of Louise de Marillac*, Louise Sullivan, D.C., ed. and trans., from original French edition *Sainte Louise de Marillac: écrits spirituels* (Brooklyn, New York: New City Press, 1991), 717.

¹⁰⁵ CCD, 1:32.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 2:316.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:61.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 1:145.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 7:589.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3:207.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1:54.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 1:109.

“Is it not enough for God that your heart is honoring the tranquility of Our Lord’s? Then it will be fit and ready to serve Him. The kingdom of God is peace in the Holy Spirit; He will reign in you if your heart is at peace. So, be at peace, Mademoiselle.”¹¹³

By contrast, Vincent understood the warning signs of an “unsettled state” that indicate one is not ready for, or not engaged in, authentic discernment.¹¹⁴ These are the very human experiences of “ill-regulated passion.”¹¹⁵ Feeling hurried, stressed, over-eager, troubled, fearful, bitter, worried, upset, jealous, resentful, or anxious at the opportunities and challenges we face trying to answer the question: “What must be done?” He stated, again to Louise, “Yes, you will tell me, but it is on account of God that I am worried. It is no longer because of God that you are worried if you are troubled because of serving Him.”¹¹⁶ Or, as he wrote to Brother Pierre Leclerc, “I feel that your desire does not come from God because it is too vehement. Those given by God are gentle and peaceful; they in no way trouble the mind as yours does, causing you anxiety.”¹¹⁷ From this place of self-forgetful patience, calmness, peace, and quiet only one thing further remains “to seek enlightenment”:¹¹⁸ “It now remains for you... to raise your heart to God and to listen to what He will say to you on this matter.”¹¹⁹

Why conversion and discernment are so difficult:

“the devil butts in, doing his utmost to dissuade us...”¹²⁰

According to Vincent de Paul’s way of thinking, “rarely is any good done without difficulty.”¹²¹ The inevitable struggles and constant difficulties experienced in reaching and maintaining a state of unrestricted readiness to discern and do God’s will were to be attributed to “the temptations of the world and the flesh.... [and] the devil.”¹²² If Monsieur Vincent possessed a keen awareness of the presence and power of God he had an equally keen awareness of the competing presence and power “of the devil, our enemy and the father of discord.”¹²³

Vincent told the Daughters of Charity, “Now, a person who loves obedience and who breaks her own will shows that she has the Spirit of Our Lord. If you want to know whether a Sister of Charity has the spirit of the new Adam, see if she’s really obedient, for

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 1:111.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 7:434.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 6:143.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:59.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 6:143.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1:212.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 7:623.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 9:524.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 4:361.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 10:19.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 9:100.

that's a sure sign. But if she loves to do her own will in all her actions, that's the sign of the spirit of the old Adam — or rather the sign of the spirit of the devil. All we need is to be really convinced of this truth, and we'll never do anything by this cursed, diabolical spirit, which is nothing other than self-will."¹²⁴ He also went so far as to say "there would be no demon, no hell, if there were no self-will."¹²⁵

The devil, "the prince of demons"¹²⁶ according to Vincent, "is a roaring lion... (who never sleeps¹²⁷) ...[and is] always prowling around seeking to devour us, he will not fail to attack you and your good resolution to belong entirely to God."¹²⁸ Further, the "evil spirit"¹²⁹ "is "clever and cunning,"¹³⁰ "shrewd"¹³¹ and "subtle."¹³² "Seducing us"¹³³ he uses his "ruses,"¹³⁴ "snares,"¹³⁵ "schemes,"¹³⁶ "wiles,"¹³⁷ and "tricks,"¹³⁸ at times even to transform himself into "an angel of light"¹³⁹ who can "urge us to do good in order to lead us to something evil."¹⁴⁰ In a marvelous turn of phrase, Vincent notes, "that's what the devil does to tempt you. He proposes something as very good and useful; he adds some sauce to make it tasty."¹⁴¹

Vincent specifically warned his followers of the dangerous temptation to be "over-zealous"¹⁴² and to "seek [ever] greater perfection." He advised, "be careful not to do too much. It is a ruse of the devil, by which he deceives good people, to induce them to do more than they are able, so that they end up not being able to do anything."¹⁴³ Succumbing to this temptation would "thwart God's plans" by drawing one's attention away from

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 10:66.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 10:68.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 3:50.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 9:492 and 10:553.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 7:203.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 8:225; Also, 2:85.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:206.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 10:12.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 4:361.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 10:8.

¹³⁴ See for example, *Ibid.*, 6:146.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 4:353.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 7:357.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 7:435.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 3:174.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 9:60.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 10:14.

¹⁴² See *Ibid.*, 2:85.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 1:92.

precisely the place that God is calling you to be at that moment.¹⁴⁴ Perfection is not a goal unto itself for a Christian, but through life's journey, "You can be sure that your vocation will bring about your sanctification and, in the end, your glorification."¹⁴⁵

Vincent prayed for the intercession of the Holy Spirit so that he and his followers would "brace [themselves]"¹⁴⁶ and be "especially... alert to the wiles of the evil one, [and] to resist them."¹⁴⁷ This state of alertness is essential since "the devil won't fail to try to take you by surprise."¹⁴⁸ In order that one not is taken by surprise by the inevitable temptations in one's life, Vincent is quite clear about what these temptations are, what they look like and feel like, and where they originate. He warns, "It's characteristic of the devil, the flesh, and the world to prompt us to what's evil. Temptation, I repeat, is an impulse that prompts us in various ways to what's evil."¹⁴⁹

If the devil, the flesh, and the world constantly seek to tempt us, God in every instance counters these "wicked phantoms,"¹⁵⁰ inspires us to "to turn a deaf ear,"¹⁵¹ "to guard against dallying with temptation,"¹⁵² and in the end do what is right and good. According to Vincent, "our reason for fearing and avoiding temptations... is that the devil's plan is to incline us to sin and to ruin us. We have to endure them patiently because the plan of God... is to have us benefit from them."¹⁵³

God "allows"¹⁵⁴ these temptations "in order to make us more virtuous and more exact in the performance of our duties."¹⁵⁵ "If I give in to the temptation, I'm committing a sin; if I make good use of it, I'll gain a great deal of merit."¹⁵⁶ When we make "bad use"¹⁵⁷ of these temptations by sinning "great evils... ensue."¹⁵⁸ By contrast, there is "great good to

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 7:123.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 3:174.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 7:203.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 10:20.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 10:250.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 10:8.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 3:50.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 6:69.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 9:280.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 10:9.

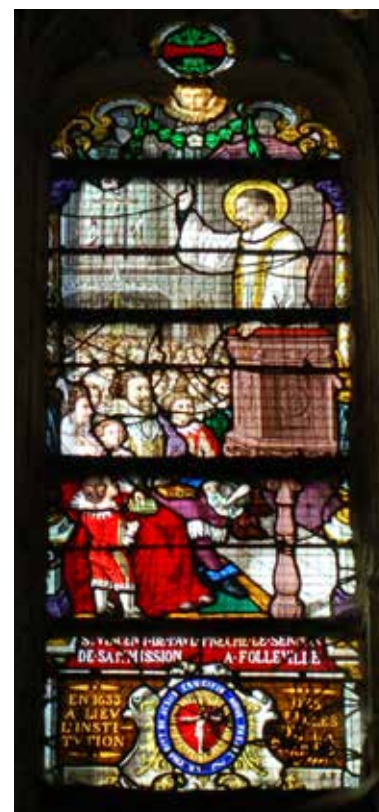
¹⁵⁴ See *Ibid.*, 9:274.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 10:18.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 10:8.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 10:7.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*



Views of the church at Folleville; and a window in the church today that depicts Vincent preaching from the pulpit.

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be drawn from them when they're used well... handled properly."¹⁵⁹ Consequently, "the very means by which the devil has tried to battle against you will help you to overcome him,"¹⁶⁰ and "draw us closer" to God.¹⁶¹

Vincent de Paul cited the example of Saint Paul who "made use of his temptations to humble himself and to give glory to God for all He was doing by His grace."¹⁶² He also reminded his followers that Jesus Christ, "the Saint of Saints was tempted." He remarked, "The Son of God wasn't exempt. How bold of the devil to approach the saint of saints. Is there any surprise then that he tempted human beings, since he attacked Our Lord?"¹⁶³ But even in the midst of temptations Christians have reason to rejoice because the "tempter"¹⁶⁴ cannot harm us. "He can tempt us, but he can never force us to do evil.' We have free will to embrace what's good and avoid evil."¹⁶⁵

In summary, Vincent says: "If we listen to the temptations of the world and the flesh, which always suggest a thousand reasons to gratify ourselves, it's inevitable that we'll have the misfortune to follow our own judgment.... If we mistrust our own strength and fear our three enemies, rejecting instead of listening to them; if, instead of being proud, we humble ourselves; if, instead of growing discouraged, we renew our resolutions and

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:227.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 4:265.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 10:11.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 10:9.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 6:146.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 10:11.

deal in the same manner with all other suggestions; then, instead of being the victims of temptation, aided by the grace of God we'll derive great good from them, and in a short time the soul will make great progress in virtue."¹⁶⁶

"[God's] grace will never fail you; on the contrary, it will abound in your soul in proportion to the adversities you encounter and your determination to overcome them with His same grace. God never allows us to be tempted beyond our strength."¹⁶⁷ According to Vincent, the "great sovereign remedy,"¹⁶⁸ therefore, is for Christians to "train ourselves for combat until we feel we are in command of the situation"¹⁶⁹ and able to "close our hearts and ears to temptation."¹⁷⁰ Under these conditions "the devil will indeed have a hard time carrying out his plans."¹⁷¹

In contrast to the language of Vincent de Paul's seventeenth-century theological reflections, contemporary theological reflection would put much less emphasis on attributing the difficulties in achieving Christian and Vincentian conversion/discernment to the influence and activities of the "devil," "demons," or "wicked phantoms." Instead, we typically now use language and images that reflect our spiritual experiences of the challenges posed by the frailties, limitations, and fault lines we find inherent in our human nature. This would include our "inclinations"¹⁷² to find sin (as expressions of self-will, selfishness, and self-centeredness) as an ever-present and powerful temptation in our lives and in our world, with consequences that we all know and can name well. In the end, whatever the theological language and constructs that we use, it is the insight into the difficulties and challenges that we face, and the empowerment of faith and grace, which are at the core of our present discussion about Vincentian conversion and discernment.

*Discernment in action: "consulting Him in your doubts, invoking Him in your needs, following His inspirations, trusting in His Goodness, and having no other intention than His glory and good pleasure."*¹⁷³

According to Vincent de Paul, this life-long spiritual journey of self-emptying ("interior humiliation")¹⁷⁴ to achieve and maintain a state of sufficient unrestricted readiness (or "perfect acquiescence")¹⁷⁵ to discern and do God's will, in "the place and manner in which

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 10:19.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 7:203.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 9:277.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 4:55.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 9:277.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷² See for example, *Ibid.*, 9:291.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 5:642.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 3:47.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:109.

He wants you to serve Him,"¹⁷⁶ always requires "our good will and honest efforts."¹⁷⁷ After all, "virtue is virtue only in so far as we make the effort to practice it."¹⁷⁸ Vincent also imparted, however, that "God wills only what is within your power,"¹⁷⁹ and "does not ask anything unreasonable of us." We should therefore "be content to do simply whatever [we] can."¹⁸⁰ As Vincent once told René Alméras, "Do not take on anything beyond your strength, do not be anxious, do not take things too much to heart, go gently, and do not work too long or too hard."¹⁸¹

We will inevitably fall short of the full measure of unrestricted readiness because "this cannot be done all at once but only gradually, gently, and patiently... by repeated acts."¹⁸² However, "we will see that this is carried out with the help of God,"¹⁸³ who "perfects"¹⁸⁴ and completes all our efforts as needed, bringing them to a providential conclusion "step-by-step... for a long time to come because there is a long way to go."¹⁸⁵ Vincent testified, "That is why God gives me new insights every day on the importance of acting this way, and more devotion to do nothing except in this way."¹⁸⁶

We learn from our faith and experience that God's plan always unfolds "in the times, places, and manner He pleases."¹⁸⁷ "God's affairs are accomplished gradually and almost imperceptibly,"¹⁸⁸ and with the results which God alone determines. As Vincent advised, "be convinced that God asks of you only that you cast your nets into the sea, and not that you catch the fish, because it is up to Him to make them go into the nets. Have no doubt that He will do so if... you wait patiently for day to come."¹⁸⁹ Or, as he also said, "Let us offer ourselves to Him to do and suffer all things for His glory and the building up of His Church. He wants nothing more. If He desires results, they are His and not ours. Let us open wide our hearts and wills in His presence, not deciding to do this or that until God has spoken."¹⁹⁰

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 7:218.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 3:206.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 7:203.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 8:49.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 7:564.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 4:146.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 5:443.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 4:147.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 8:297.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 5:443.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 2:350.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 7:348.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 2:257.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 7:358.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 7:531-532.



Image from a German Holy Card, depicting Louise and Vincent offering aid to the sick and poverty-stricken.

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In Vincent de Paul's view, our readiness to enter into authentic discernment will be exactly the same as the measure of our personal and communal conversion at that moment. Of the core virtues, or values, that Vincent identified as being essential for disciples of Jesus, the one that he identified as being the most important was "simplicity."¹⁹¹ Indeed, he called this virtue "my gospel."¹⁹² For Vincent de Paul the advice "to examine matters in detail"¹⁹³ means to examine them as honestly and objectively "as far as is in our power"¹⁹⁴ to determine one's relative state of "restricted" versus "unrestricted" readiness. Vincent proclaimed in this regard, "I have special devotion and consolation in saying things as they are."¹⁹⁵

Our always imperfect conversion is never to be used as an excuse for putting-off or delaying discernment, since if we wait for perfect unrestricted readiness we will wait without end, and without effect. As Vincent said, "We must go forward without becoming discouraged"¹⁹⁶ "because, on God's road, not to advance is to fall back since man never remains in the same condition."¹⁹⁷ However, this must be done with great prudence. These precautions are aimed at honestly acknowledging and minimizing the influence of our

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 9:476.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 5:636.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 9:476.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 4:139.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 2:146.

self-will and pride with respect to the question at hand. As long as our actions are not sinful, God will accept our efforts and they will in some way contribute to the fulfillment of his plan.

“What must be done now?”

As detailed earlier, this Vincentian question “What must be done?” already has its definitive answer in our shared baptismal commitments as Christ’s disciples to follow God’s will “in us and in all that concerns us.” Through Vincent and Louise’s discernment this “fundamental”¹⁹⁸ question received other “firm and unchanging”¹⁹⁹ answers in the distinctive Christology, missiology, ecclesiology, soteriology, spirituality, virtues, and rules of the various “Vincentian” organizations and the “Vincentian” tradition itself. The results of these core discernments do not need to be repeated, and serve as “givens” in our subsequent discernments as described below.

It follows then that the question remaining to be answered through our ongoing conversion and discernment is immediate and of the “moment:” What must “I,” “You,” and “We” do as members of the Vincentian family to discern God’s will as revealed through his providential plan? How, when, and where are we today called by justice, and empowered by charity, to serve our brothers and sisters who are poor, and advocate for the systemic and sustainable changes which will address the root causes of their poverties?

As part of the discernment to answer this final question, there is a preparatory question that first needs to be asked and answered: Out of ALL the options (as influenced by political, economic, social, cultural, religious, scientific, and geographical factors) detailing what *could* be done in the present circumstances, which are the ones that Providence seems to be revealing “in a way that cannot be mistaken,”²⁰⁰ and answers the “how,” “when,” and “where” posed by the Vincentian question of this moment in our lives?

There is always some real urgency to answering this question of the moment correctly, since the stakes are constantly high for the poor who are to be served. However, Vincent noted that Providence “requires time for generating its works.”²⁰¹ Therefore, we should not be “restless”²⁰² and “not be in too great a hurry” in answering.²⁰³ Rather, we should take “all the time [we] need.”²⁰⁴ Vincent reminded his followers often, “Let us not rush into things,”²⁰⁵ and “you have no need of hurrying.”²⁰⁶ “What does not get done at one

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4:368.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:332.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:54.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 2:514.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 7:531.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 2:502.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 2:631.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 2:657.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 2:631.

time gets done at another.”²⁰⁷ Vincent frequently quoted the proverb, “Let us make haste. Slowly.”²⁰⁸ He further added, “God’s affairs do not usually deteriorate because we take more time to consider them and recommend them to Him; on the contrary, everything [only goes better].”²⁰⁹ This purposeful slowdown of the discernment process is essential since it allows us to “proceed calmly.”²¹⁰ While time spent in conversion and discernment is time well-spent in Vincent’s view, if these opportunities are wasted “or put off too long... [this] lost time can never be recovered.”²¹¹

A central “maxim” guiding Vincentian discernment is “the less we are involved in it, the better the Will of God will be made known to us.”²¹² This revelation is something we “await rather than anticipate.”²¹³ We are “never to act except in a passive way,”²¹⁴ and we are to do nothing except attentively listen for God to reveal his will. Since God speaks to us through the prisms of faith and experience these should be the foci of our calm, prayerful, detached attention. This means that we should never presume to “take too much initiative,”²¹⁵ or make “the first move... either directly or indirectly,”²¹⁶ to seek out or suggest answers to the questions for discernment. Further, “we must be on our guard against pushing our own way”²¹⁷ into pre-determined or stock answers based merely on “our views and way of thinking.”²¹⁸

Vincent once wrote to a confrere: “I fear you are in too great a hurry about everything.... Now, this happens because you are incessantly occupied with ideas and ways of making progress, and you rush to carry them out. And when you undertake something that does not succeed according to your liking, you talk of changing it at the first difficulties that present themselves. In the name of God, Monsieur, reflect on this and on what I had told you about it at other times, and do not let yourself get carried away by the impetuosity of your impulsive ideas. What usually deceives us is the appearance of good according to human reason, which never or rarely attains the divine. I have told you on previous occasions... that the things of God come about by themselves, and that wisdom consists in following Providence step by step. And you can be sure of the truth of a maxim which seems paradoxical, namely, that he who is hasty falls back in the interests of God.”²¹⁹

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 3:459.

²⁰⁸ See for example *Ibid.*, 2:310; Also, 5:400.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:249-250.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2:514.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 4:358.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 7:229.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 8:346.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 8:12.

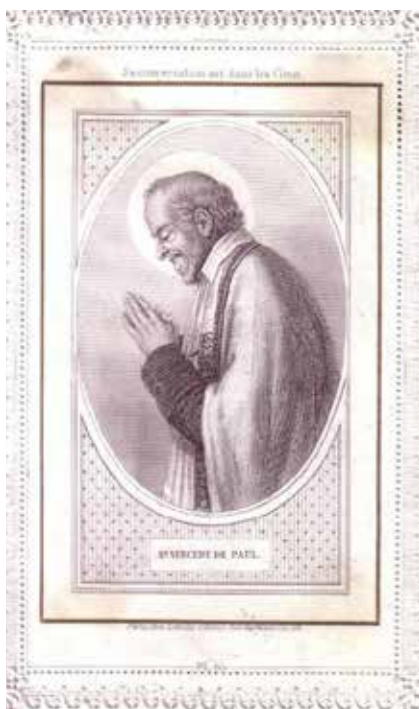
²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 7:491.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 7:559.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 8:326.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 3:160.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:520-521.



Vincent at prayer; and an engraving of Vincent's statue in St. Peter's Basilica, Rome.

Image collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute



This required passivity should not be confused with inactivity or entrapment in the seeming safety of the status quo.²²⁰ Rather, it is based on our “steadfast”²²¹ desire and free choice to move forward for the sake of fulfilling our vocations by finding the times, places, and circumstances where we will “correspond” with God’s plans as they are revealed.²²² Vincent said, “So then, let us be steadfast, and always walk in the ways of God without coming to a standstill.”²²³ As he pointed out, this “indifference” gives “us the leisure to learn from experience” and “acknowledge the disposition from on high.”²²⁴ “We should receive with respect all that God offers us, and then examine matters in detail in order to do what is most expedient.”²²⁵

This discernment, then, is a question of judging both the precise moment (after “mature deliberation”²²⁶ and “serious consultation”²²⁷) when the opportunity seems ripe and the means are judged “feasible,”²²⁸ “reasonable and suitable.”²²⁹ As we have seen, this requires that we take the time to “examine matters thoroughly,” “being attentive... down to the last details,”²³⁰ “with respect to the essentials, but also as regards the circumstances.”²³¹

²²⁰ The status quo is not an option in a vocation. As a Daughter of Charity once observed in a conference given by Vincent: “It’s impossible for us to remain always in the same state. If, therefore, we don’t advance in the love of our vocation, we grow cold and fall back.” *Ibid.*, 9:354.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 3:157.

²²² *Ibid.*, 5:412.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 3:157.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 3:164.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 5:636.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 2:236.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 2:262.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 8:66.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 4:479.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 7:318.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 2:249.

We do this by objectively considering the full range of “pros” and “cons”²³² of “all licit and possible means”²³³ which suggest themselves in answer to the question “What *could* be done?” What helps keep this process authentic is our willingness to take “the necessary precautions”²³⁴ by always consulting with “wise [and] competent persons,”²³⁵ who are also “persons of outstanding piety,”²³⁶ about the question and options for action at-hand. And then we should only move “after much prayer and by common consent,”²³⁷ “having weighed and considered all things.”²³⁸ Vincent points out, “God blesses resolutions taken this way through consultation.”²³⁹

Vincent’s reasons for relying on “much prayer and consultation”²⁴⁰ in the process of discernment revealed his sense of personal honesty: “That is how I act, and rarely do I do anything out of my own poor head.... I have within myself that unfortunate quality of judging everything and everyone according to my own poor wits, but experience has made me see the happiness of acting otherwise and how God blesses this manner of acting.”²⁴¹

Interestingly, Vincent de Paul was not particularly troubled by mistakes or failures in discernment (as long as they did not result from sin). In an instance when this happened he remarked, “I admit once again that we moved too quickly.... Oh well! There is no use talking about it any longer; the mistake has been made. It will teach us another time to look more closely and to take more time with what we have to do. God, who knows how to draw good from evil, will see that all turns to His glory. One mistake should not be corrected by another.... So you should continue.... If the work that has begun does not succeed, it should not, however, depend on us but on God to bring it to completion, since it is His Providence that has committed us to it.”²⁴²

While Vincent admits the possibility of discernment reaching a point of absolute clarity, in truth what he trained his disciples to do was to come to reasonable clarity (achieved “in the presence of God, after many prayers and the seeking of advice”²⁴³), and then to act boldly, without hesitation and without looking back — “All that remains now is for you to make a firm resolution and put your hand seriously to the work”²⁴⁴ “as rough

²³² See *Ibid.*, 2:236. See also, *Ibid.*, 2:458, 3:403.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 4:362.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 7:40.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 5:566.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 2:396.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 4:368.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 2:262.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 6:77.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 5:316.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 2:637-638.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 7:631.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 2:256.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 5:462.

tools in the hands of a good workman.”²⁴⁵ “I also hope that you will take the resolution to correspond henceforth to God’s plans for you and put them into effect without delay, always and everywhere.”²⁴⁶

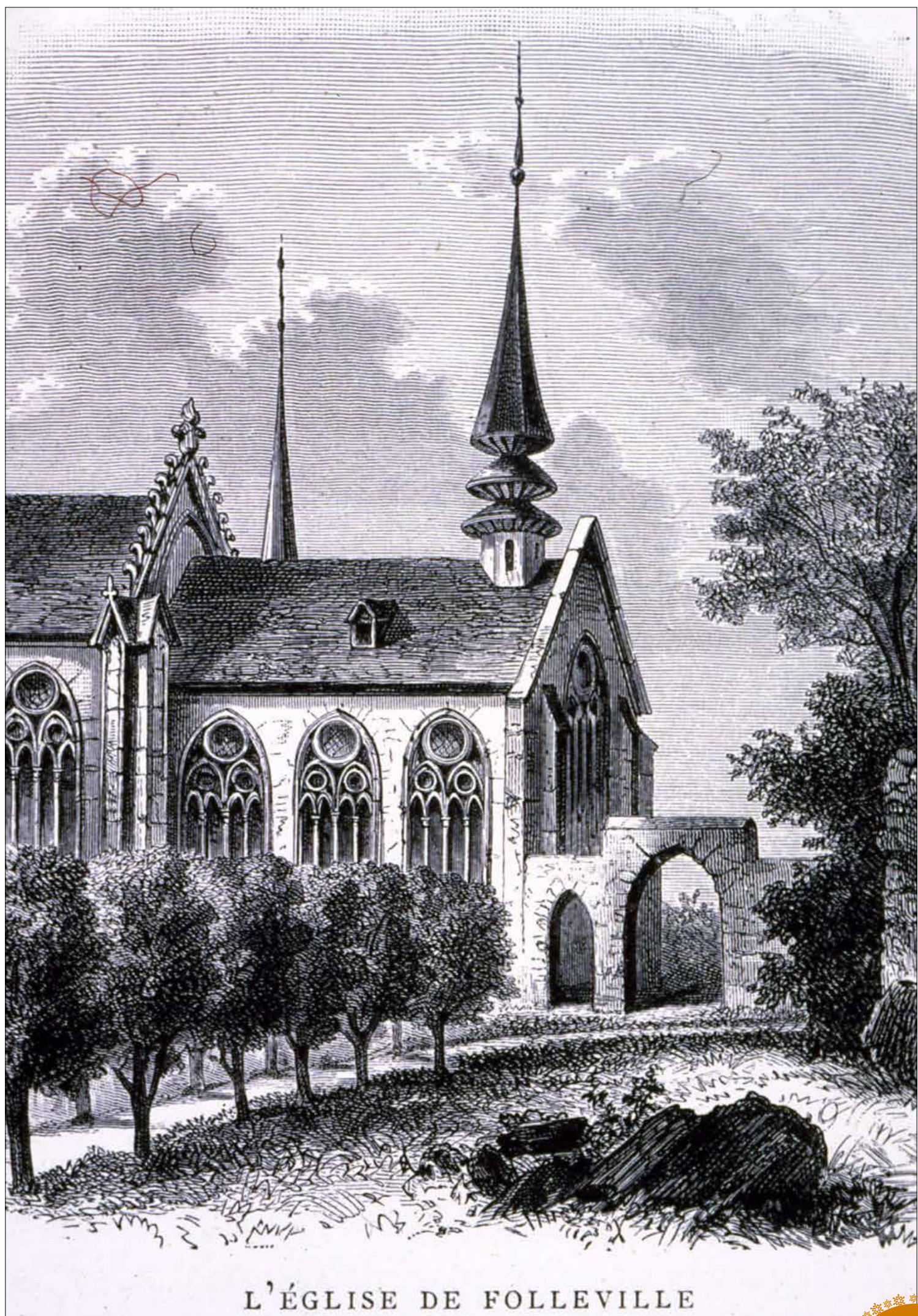
Conclusion

In light of the stark challenges to charity and justice, systemic change, and sustainability that have characterized and will continue to characterize our twenty-first century, and in light of how these challenges are impacting poor people throughout the world, there is a new urgency for asking and answering the Vincentian question of “What must be done?” As we have seen, the efficacy of the Vincentian tradition’s answer to this question today, as in the past, is deeply rooted in conversion and discernment as understood in the Catholic and Christian tradition. One of the present challenges for the members of the Vincentian tradition is to find ways for our tradition to serve as a highest common denominator for all people of good will and all faiths to ask and answer this question together.



²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 8:286.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 4:358.



The L'église Saint-Jacques-le-Majeur-et-Saint-Jean-Baptiste, or Church of Folleville.

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An engraved contemporary portrait of Madame de Gondy.

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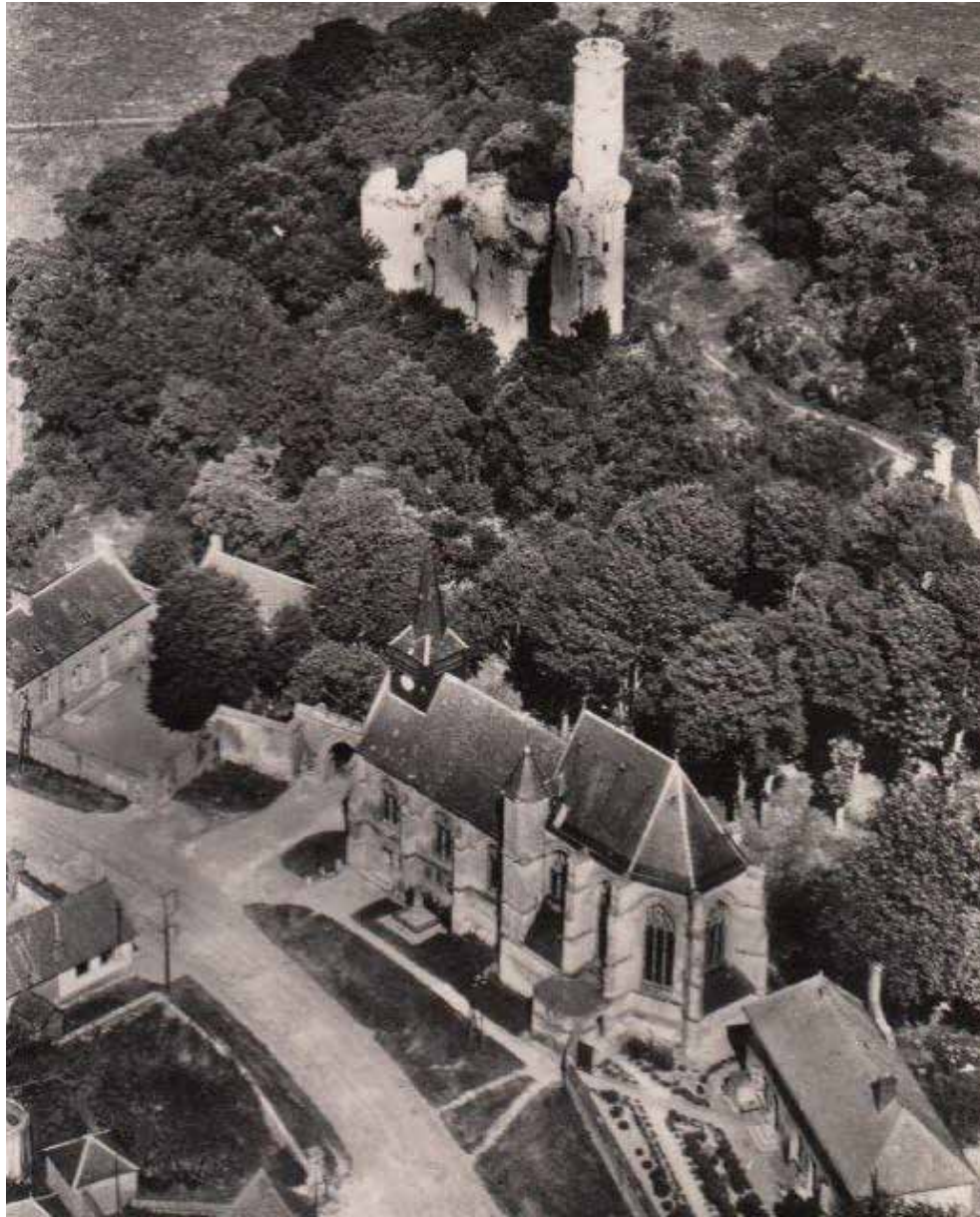




St. Jane de Chantal, heart and crucifix in her hands.

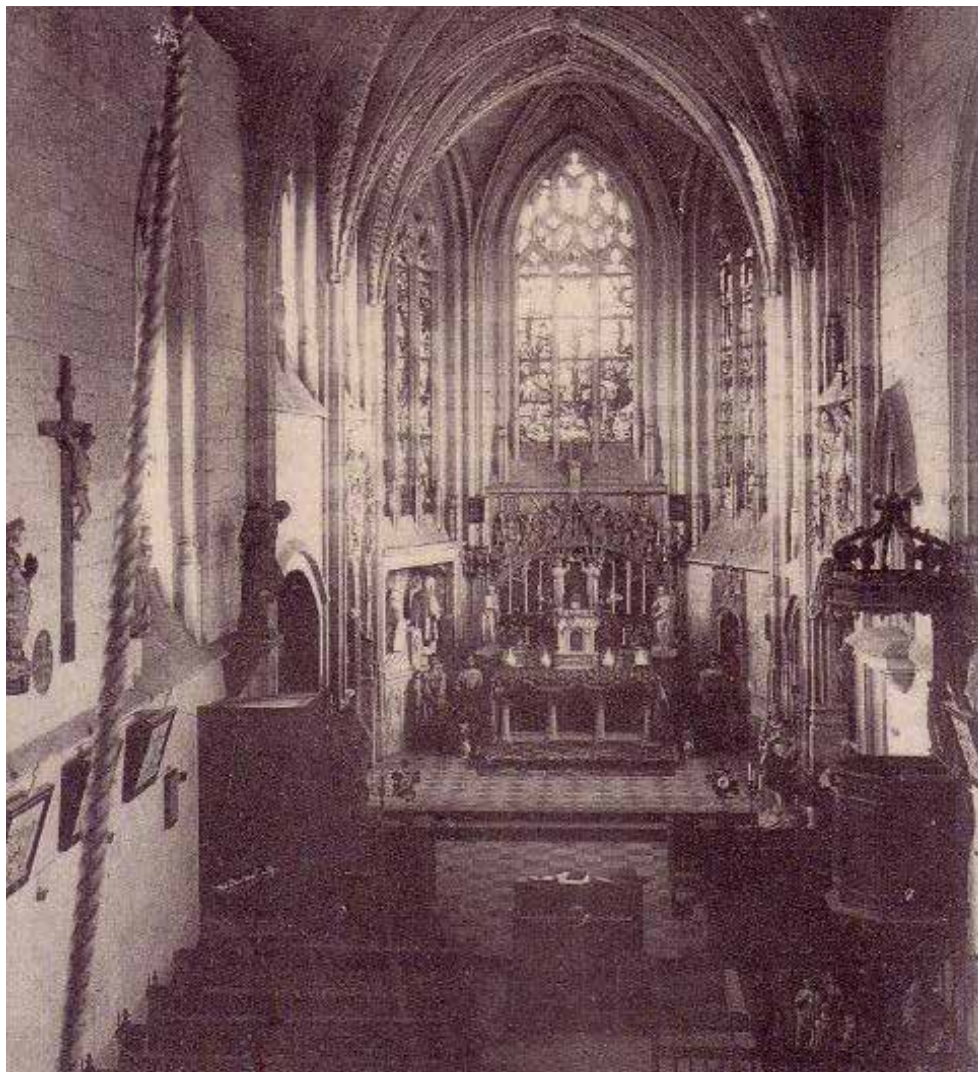
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Views of the church at Folleville.

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A window in the church today that depicts Vincent preaching from the pulpit.

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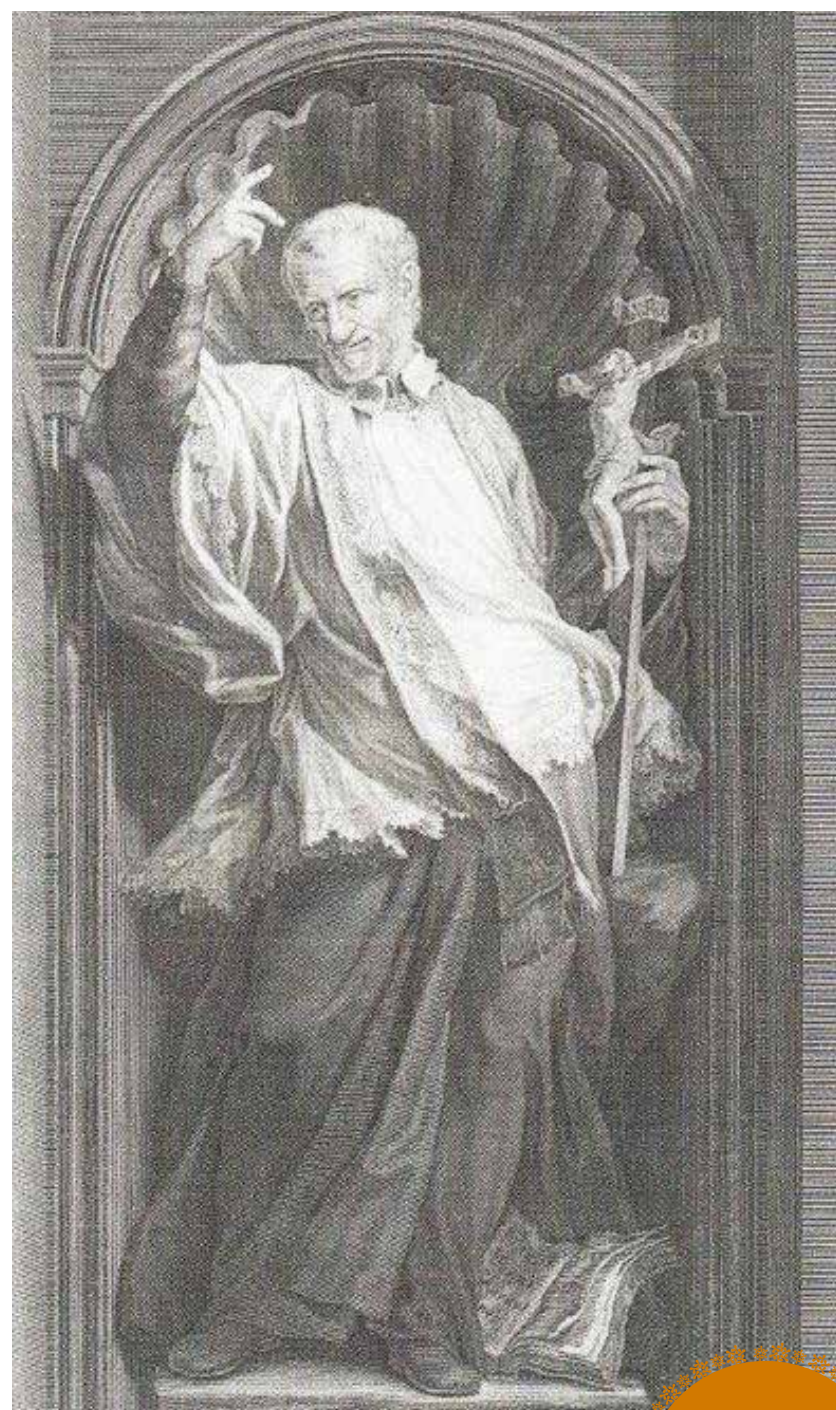
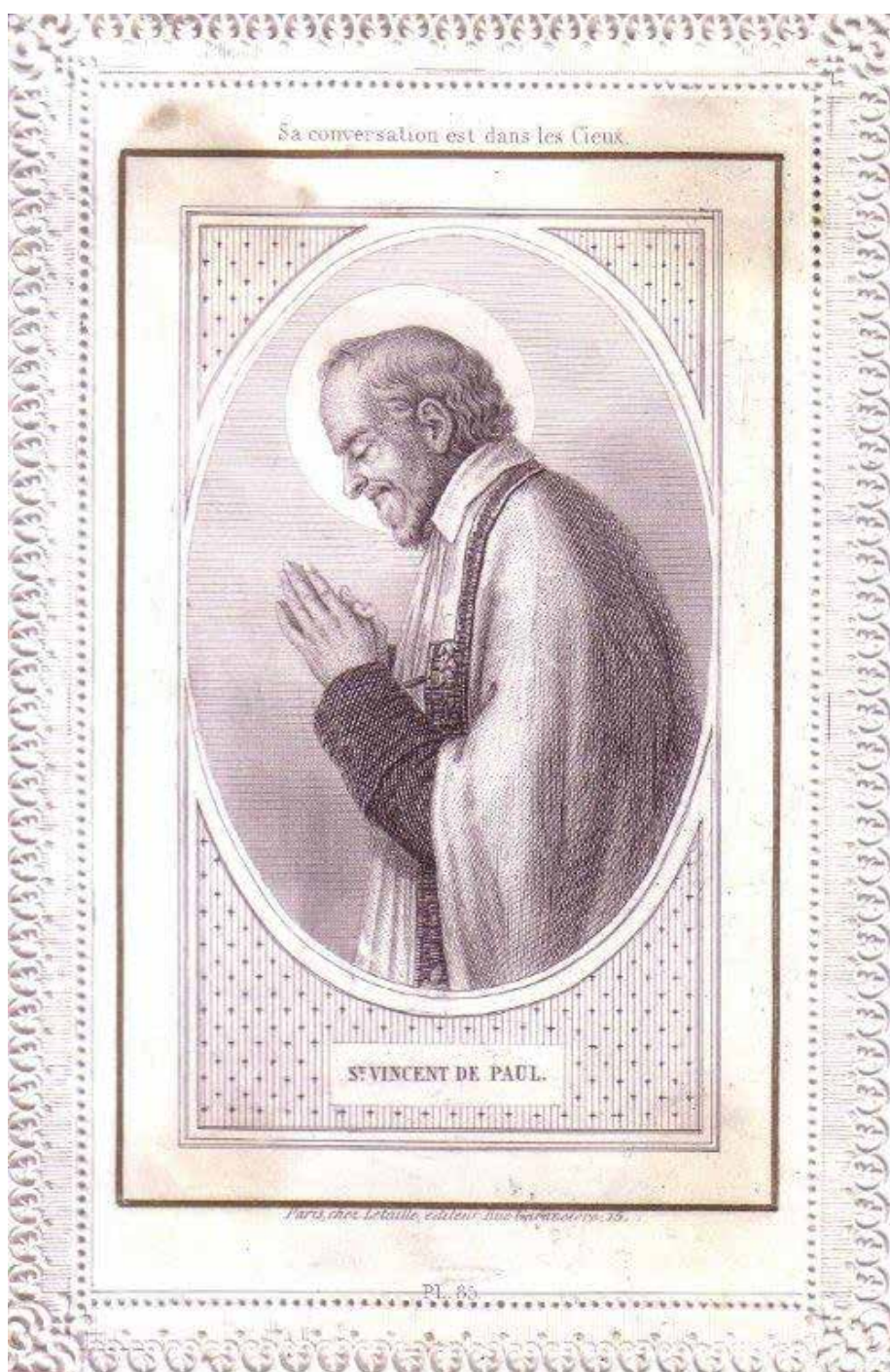




Image from a German Holy Card, depicting Louise and Vincent offering aid to the sick and poverty-stricken.

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Vincent at prayer; and an engraving of Vincent's statue in St. Peter's Basilica, Rome.

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